

# How risky is it to be a child? Towards a sociology of uncertainty

Dr Sandra Leaton Gray

UCL Institute of Education, 20 Bedford Way, London, WC1H 0AL

## Abstract

### Introduction

The idea of being worried about child safety is nothing new. Nothing is more emotive than reports of children being involved in crime, accidents and disaster. Whether it is iconic photos of burned children from the Vietnam War from 1972, the chilling 1973 UK public information film 'Lonely Water', that discouraged young people from swimming in rivers, reports of children escaping from the 2004 school siege at Beslan, or pictures of a drowned Syrian toddler lying on a Turkish beach in 2015, we are hard wired to become upset about such things. Protecting children is central to the human condition, and for that reason, we give a great deal of conscious and subconscious thought to how we look after our young. Intrinsic within this is a daily attempt to keep them safe, and this means regularly assessing risk. However as a society, risk is not something we find it easy to assess.

The reason for this is that risk is a social construction, particularly in relation to children. We know this because it is clear that conceptualisations of childhood have changed over the centuries, and with them, associated perceptions of risk. For example, where children may have been able to roam for miles around their homes in the past, the geographical space they are allowed to occupy shrunk considerably over a period of six decades, and presumably continues to do so. (Mey and Gunther, 2014; Hillman, Adams and Whitelegg, 1988; Saracho and Spodek, 1998). In addition, previously the main peril for some children may have been considered spiritual, for example failing to be baptised before falling prey to an untimely death (Schofield and Midi Berry, 1971), whereas since the decline of religious practice and the advent of vaccinations and antibiotics, most parents of children in industrialised nations today would no doubt say that they feel a reasonably good sense of control and agency with regard to their children's health. This is in contrast to the situation of children living in low-income economies who face real threats to their survival such as war, famine, illness, infectious disease, and vulnerability to natural disasters such as earthquakes, flooding and drought.

It is clear that as long as you are growing up in an industrialised country, it has probably never been safer to be a child, yet it seems we still feel the need to find aspects of risk to worry about. To that end, the 21<sup>st</sup> century has brought with it new and increased concerns, amplified by social and mass media reporting. Risks commonly invoked range from frequent, low-risk events such as minor food hygiene or bullying problems, to infrequent, high-risk events such as paedophilia-related crime, fires, terrorist attacks and serious adverse weather events. Within these parameters, schools are expected to engage in resilience planning to ensure the safety of pupils within their charge. Yet because of the socially constructed nature of risk, this is something that must be done with one eye to public relations and the media. This makes proper risk assessment more difficult and potentially less effective than it needs to be.

This article argues that there is a need for more sociology to be done in explaining the nature of children's risk within contemporary society. If risk is classified as a social problem, it is easier to explore why what we might term *moral panic* (Cohen, 2002) has arisen, and how it might be possible to move forwards. To this end, there are several themes that deserve particular attention. Firstly, examining definitions of risk is a useful starting point. Then it is helpful to examine the apparently paradoxical rise in risk and disaster management policies at a time when the idea of the expert is subject to increasing mistrust (Urry, 2003). An understanding of power relationships in times of what might be perceived as a kind of existential *collective stress* (Barton, 1969) plays an important role here as well. Finally, it is useful to examine the desire of individuals for a sense of personal and collective agency in the face of adverse events, something we see represented in the language of risk and a particular *Weltanschauung* or worldview adopted by certain groups. This is underpinned by the desire for collective sense-making and/or a genuine fear of becoming victims. All of these considerations are useful in helping identify the influences that are shaping risk perception in relation to children in 21<sup>st</sup> century Western Europe as well as the US and other countries. In the chapter, these themes are considered in the light of the probability of different events as well as their likely seriousness. The primary focus is on examples from the UK, which we consider to provide particularly extreme case study of collective parental anxiety regarding risk, but we draw on international examples where possible.

It is clear that there are several key factors that are influencing risk assessment in a way that is unrelated from the statistical probability of serious harm. These factors include the role of power and vested interests in maintaining a rhetoric of crisis (for example safety compliance as a professional currency). Another factor is the impact of the internet in speeding up perceptions of time, compressing distance, and increasing the perception of event frequency, giving a sense of something the social anthropologist Levi-Strauss might call a 'hot chronology' (Levi-Strauss, 1994). Anxieties regarding the increasing complexity of society are often conflated with these factors, leading to real concern on the part of families and teachers as they seek to navigate a realistic and sensible path, what Backett-Milburn and Hardern (2004) describe as the 'the shifting and dynamic nature of the mundane negotiation of risk'. We argue for a more sophisticated 21<sup>st</sup> century debate about the nature of risk and what we are prepared to tolerate for our children.

### Creating definitions of risk – a difficult task

As discussed in the introduction, there are no fixed definitions available for the notion of risk. Many writers including Quarantelli (1998), Giddens (1991) and Beck (2007) have made this point repeatedly. Risk can also be seen as distinct from the idea of disaster or catastrophe. As Beck writes:

*Risk is not synonymous with catastrophe. Risk means the anticipation of catastrophe. Risks concern the possibility of future occurrences and developments; they make present a state of the world that does not (yet) exist. Whereas every catastrophe is spatially, temporally and socially determined, the anticipation of catastrophe lacks any spatio-temporal or social concreteness.*

Beck (2007): 9

Therefore one way of seeing risk is that it is a relatively fluid concept that depends on context for its meaning. This is primarily because tolerance for risk has changed throughout history. One example of this change is the way that the distance children can roam from home has reduced. In the 1930s, the work of German researcher Martha Muchow painted a picture of a social world in which children were able independently to engage with and appropriate urban space, reshaping it into ersatz playgrounds to suit their needs (May and Gunther, *op. cit.*). This was a world in which children were actively encouraged to leave the home on sunny days in search of both formal playgrounds, and informal, improvised play opportunities on wasteground and so on, walking much further from home without parents than we might expect them to in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Subsequently the ability of relatively young children to experience this level of independence reduced over time, and unaccompanied young children have now more or less disappeared from 21<sup>st</sup> century urban streets in many situations. This has been quantified in various studies. For example, in research by public health physician William Bird, (reported in Souter, 2015), we see that over the course of four generations, roughly a century, the permitted roaming space available to an eight year old boy shrank from 6 miles for a great-grandfather, to 1 mile for a grandfather, down to half a mile for a mother and then finally for a contemporary eight year old living in the same location as his his forebears, a mere 300 metres from his house.

The restriction in movement is not necessarily a function of traffic density, as is often argued. As Hillman, Adams and Whitelegg (*op. cit.*) make clear, between 1922-1986, roads in Britain were described as increasingly safe, due to reducing casualties. Yet a factor in defining them as safe is that in many cases, pedestrians and cyclists have simply stopped using them freely, leading to apparent reductions in child road deaths per 100,000 children that doesn't reflect the reality of children's lives. In the same report, Hillam *et al* report that parents cited molestation more frequently than traffic as grounds for curtailing permission for children to be out after dark, even though the likelihood of an averse 'stranger danger' event in this regard is very small indeed (Pritchard, Davey and Williams, 2013). Hillam *et al* describe the attitude of German parents during the same period to be more accepting of risk, despite the comparative environmental situations being broadly similar. Clearly, therefore, the relationship between risk, danger, safety and parental perception is a complex one here and poorly grounded in the statistical measures available.

At the other end of the scale in terms of parental anxiety lies the concept of the 'disaster' (or catastrophe, as Beck might label it), which may take various forms. This could mean a natural disaster such as a flood or earthquake, a health disaster such as a disease epidemic, a terrorist attack, a large-scale accident such as a train or aeroplane crash, or something similar. For parents in the 1970s this may even have meant a nuclear event. All these things are considerably less likely to happen than an individual child being knocked off a bike by a car, for example, but the unpredictability, severity and scale of disasters means that they represent our most fundamental human fears in relation to our own survival. Even here definitions can be elusive, however. How do we differentiate between something that is just difficult to cope with, and something that represents a threat to survival? Up front they may look familiar to those caught up in the situation, and sometimes it is only with the benefit of

hindsight that we are able to give an event a sense of scale and proportion and label it accordingly.

Bearing this perceptual difficulty in mind, disaster sociologists document how people behave during periods of *collective stress* (a term coined by Barton, 1969) and here it is clear that different models exist when defining the scale and severity of a disaster (Dombrowsky, 1989, 1998). It may be that it makes sense to look at numbers injured or dead (something that could be described as an insurance model). Another useful classification tool might be a lack of nutrition/clothing/housing/aid (something that might be described as a Red Cross model). A third classification might be the breakdown of public order and safety (something that could be described as a Government model). In addition to Dombrowsky's useful list of classifications, the psychological impact of disaster may also be significant, and the role of time, space and severity is also likely to be a factor (Sorokin and Merton, 1937).

Within such models, while we see the effect of events on the human race as a whole, a full understanding of the perception of risk and disaster in the context of children needs to go beyond this, and beyond the kinds of cataclysmic natural or war-related disasters we might see on news services. Alternatively if we simply rely on published statistical information about children's risk and associated reports, we reduce the framework down to a focus on medical and traffic-related issues, as little alternative work is done on risk in other areas for children (as opposed to humans in general). This means we need to move beyond the etiology of disaster, as listed above, towards a more subjective view that allows us to consider the lived experience of risk by children and those around them.

To explore this properly we can borrow from Urry's Five Elements model (Urry, 2003) and apply this to the particular situation of children. Urry came up with five general categories that can be used to understand disaster by allowing us to understand more about processes that unsettle people, including aspects of uncertainty and the loss of ability to define a situation. These five categories are:

- Structure
- Flow
- Ideology
- Performance
- Complexity.

The next section will explore these categories in relation to children and risk/disaster, and their perception within society.

### Structure

While Giddens (1991) sees childhood as what he might call a 'sequestered' social state, with childhood having been moved from the public to a private, domestic domain, we also live in a time where attendance at school allows the state to place children in cohorts, and determine what is normal or not normal for children at different ages. This gives the relationship between home, school and social policy a certain interconnectedness, which brings with it in turn pressure for parents to conform. Within this is a sense of what is appropriate in terms of risk. Therefore if one set of parents decides it is appropriate for a

child to cycle to school from the age of nine, and all the other local parents decide it is not, the child cyclist will be seen as some kind of risk 'outlier' and indeed one can even imagine a situation where a parent might be spoken to by the school and informed that their actions are unusual in permitting this. In this way, anxiety levels are potentially raised by the structural situation of the environment external to the child. An additional factor here is immediacy. The nature of mass media and social media in the digital age means that space and time are compressed. In this climate, news feels like it is happening on the doorstep, and happening all the time. The consequence of this is urban risk factors are routinely applied to rural situations inappropriately, for example the concept of 'stranger danger' being used to discourage children from interacting with unknown adults, whereas in smaller communities this may be helpful or even necessary for a child's wellbeing. Similarly the fear of road traffic accidents may lead indirectly to child obesity as children are increasingly driven long distances rather than walking or cycling<sup>1</sup>. In this category, external social structures are therefore used to give an indication of perceived risk and promote particular types of conformity.

### Flow

In the previous section we touched on the influence of mass media and social media on perceptions of risk. In this category of flow, we see the role of charities, government departments and non-governmental organisations seeking to influence the social environment of children via harnessing the flow of information. For example, the UK's National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NSPCC) ran a Green Dot/Full Stop campaign, which ended in 2008. The NSPCC engaged firms such as leading advertising agency Saatchi and Saatchi to create headlines such as '*Together we can stop child abuse. FULL STOP*'. This campaign eventually raised £250m for the charity and made the issue of child abuse more prominent in the public consciousness. However the charity has been heavily criticised for spending disproportionately on advertising to the tune of approximately half its revenue (Daily Telegraph, 2003), and similarly criticised for invoking child safeguarding issues inappropriately to engender a sense of moral panic<sup>2</sup> and encourage even higher levels of fundraising from the general public (Furedi, 2014).

This media-friendly approach is similar to the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF). This charity was originally set up to provide for the physical survival of children after World War II, but subsequently repositioned by Chief Executive Carol Bellamy (a former US corporate lawyer and financier) to emphasise advocacy for children's rights rather than maintaining a primary focus on child mortality. This new focus was clearly visible in the title of their 2005 report '*Why are millions of children losing out on their childhood?*' (UNICEF, 2005). This repositioning was subject to extensive criticism by the medical profession amongst others. As Horton (2004) argued:

---

<sup>1</sup> Hillam *et al* (*op. cit*) also came to various conclusions about the link between risk and reduction in walking and cycling by children but linked this to deferred deaths by young drivers. The implicit assumption in the report was that children were not becoming sufficiently familiar with road use. However their report predates what has since been described as the 'obesity epidemic'.

<sup>2</sup> We define this term later in the chapter.

*A preoccupation with rights ignores the fact that children will have no opportunity for development at all unless they survive. The language of rights means little to a child stillborn, an infant dying in pain from pneumonia, or a child desiccated by famine. The most fundamental right of all is the right to survive. Child survival must sit at the core of UNICEF's advocacy and country work. Currently, and shamefully, it does not.*

*(ibid: 2072)*

There are two aspects to this. Individual organisations such as the NSPCC and UNICEF frequently seek to harness the flow of information in this way, and in doing so, extend the range and involvement of their activities in the child protection/safeguarding/rights sector, leading to the identification of issues that they can appropriate as campaigns to bring to the public attention. This is always well-intentioned, after all, who would disagree with the need to protect children or give them rights? However the second aspect is that there are invariably unintended consequences as a result of doing this, because of the identification of campaigns on grounds of a) such campaigns being simple to articulate to the public, and b) apparently possible to do something about. This can distort the severity and scale of a problem in the eye of the public. In doing this, it has the effect of changing the perception of particular kinds of risk, in this case privileging child abuse as a cause at the expense of social deprivation, and children's rights at the expense of poverty, disease and starvation, both of which are significantly more likely to kill children (Pritchard, Davey and Williams, *op. cit.*, Horton, *op. cit.*).

### Ideology

As we have argued throughout this chapter, risk is not just about actual likelihood, but also about belief, and it is in the category of ideology that we see the paradoxical situation of a desire to protect children increasing other risks. As Hillam *et al* make clear, driving a child to school increases the likelihood of road traffic accidents for other children who are not in a car. Similarly, a professionalised rhetoric of risk can override individual judgements via unintended consequences. A good example of this was the way many UK schools reacted to the rise of digital photography at school events. Many parents were unfairly prohibited from taking pictures of their own children in the name of child protection/safeguarding by head teachers, who freely invoked the Data Protection Act (1998) as grounds for any prohibition. However a school play or concert is considered to be a private event in UK law and as such the Data Protection Act (DPA) does not apply here. In other words, parents do not need permission from the school in order to take digital pictures for private use. At the same time, schools were routinely using digital pictures of children in publicity materials without parental permission, and also starting to collect biometric data without parental permission, for lunch payment purposes as well as library book loans. This did breach the DPA but schools were frequently unaware of the anomaly. For this reason the Information Commissioner's Office had to issue guidance on taking photographs in schools (ICO, 2015

Another example of policy being lost in translation is the trend towards public leisure centres introducing strict parent:child ratios for public swimming sessions. These are a characteristic of the UK leisure industry as many fewer rules appear to exist for swimming pool parent:child ratios in the rest of Western Europe, where it is generally left up to parents to decide about appropriate balances. The UK ratios are rooted in guidance issued

by the Institute of Sport and Recreation Management, but this is not always applied sensitively in practice. As a consequence, such ratios can be very complex for parents to navigate, and there is little if any flexibility. For example, taking the first example that appears during an internet search, we find the Tandridge Trust website, where there is a complex grid representing 12 different permutations of Leisure Centre (they run four facilities), sessions, age and ratio, that users are required to navigate. In one box on the grid, for example, we learn that

*All Gentle Splash and under 8's sessions have a ratio of 1 adult to 2 children under 4. All children under 4 are required to wear a swim aid unless they are being supervised on a 1:1 basis. The ratio for 4-7 is 1:3 during these sessions.*

Tandridge Trust (2015)

This statement is typical of other leisure centres across the country. The unintended consequence of rigid ratios such as these may be that parents are indirectly prevented from teaching their children to swim, if they feel unwelcome or wrong-footed by the leisure centre administrators, and discouraged from attending. Here we have an example of the legitimacy of a professional elite (leisure centre managers) assumed, and parents effectively disenfranchised in the process. This is also an example of risk-related decisions being highly bureaucratised in a manner previously described by Scott, Jackson and Backett-Milburn (1998), standardizing responses without taking into account social context or life experience. An ideology of risk (relating to ratios) has overruled parental judgement. However this was not the intention of the original guidance. As the UK's Royal Society for the Prevention of Accidents states:

*The Institute of Sport and Recreation Management (ISRM) have guidance on this and many pool managers will use this guidance. Some parents have found the standard ratio of adults to children advised by the ISRM and used by pool managers, to be restrictive. The guidance issued by the ISRM does allow for flexibility based on the risk present at individual pools so it is worth discussing this with your local pool.*

(Royal Society for the Prevention of Accidents, 2015)

Tracing the policy back to accident data, if we look at the swimming pool accident data for 2013<sup>3</sup>, for example, we see that death by drowning in swimming pools for children is extremely rare, with just 6 adults and children dying in swimming pools in the UK, of whom 3 were children (ROSPA, 2014). If we look more closely at the data, this includes incidences where an adult or child died because of a heart attack in the water, for example, so might have died anyway. The data also do not distinguish between privately owned swimming pools, hotel pools (where lifeguards are not usually present) and publicly owned leisure centres (where lifeguards are always present). So we don't know exactly how many children died in a leisure centre swimming pool in 2013, and what the relationship was to the type and quantity of supervision. More worryingly, the consequence of ratio policies may simply

---

<sup>3</sup> There is no reason to think 2013 is atypical in terms of accident data so this is provided as an appropriate example.

be to defer deaths, in the manner that Hillam *et al* reported for road traffic accidents; heavily supervised young children of today may simply be more likely to drown as youths because they don't go swimming very often and their water safety awareness is comparatively low, compared to that of children who swim frequently under less supervision. If we look at the data for swimming in rivers, we see that the figure for older children is indeed higher, in that 15 young people between the ages of 15-19 drowned, compared to only 1 in a swimming pool, suggesting risks are being taken outside the context of leisure centres, resulting in fatalities. This may be because lifeguards are very good at saving lives (which we suspect they are), or it may also be because young people are not sufficiently safety conscious when unsupervised (which we suspect is also a significant factor). Either way, it is reasonable to wonder whether deaths are simply being deferred. In this context, ideology does not always align with statistical risk. In comparison, in the US the issue of children's swimming risk has been approached more scientifically, with a greater emphasis on the public health aspects of mortality at a population level. There has been more sophisticated analysis of the nuances of risk, and several papers have pointed to the additional risks faced by foreign-born males and black males, putting forward tentative explanations for this (Saluja *et al*, 2006; Brenner *et al*, 1995). Unlike the UK, research attention seems to be focused on areas of actual, rather than perceived, risk.

Given that there can be a mismatch between the perception of risk in this regard, and the reality of what is happening statistically, it is helpful to give some consideration to underpinning reasons. One significant factor is likely to be changes to the legal system. In 1995, for example, the UK Government introduced the possibility of Conditional (No Win No Fee) agreements in personal injury cases. This was aimed at widening access to justice whilst also reducing the burden on the state. However this change led to a significant increase in the volume of personal injury cases (Association of British Insurers, 2012), which may have been influenced by the ability of personal injury lawyers being able to advertise their services. This is not simply a UK issue. For example across Europe there has been a statistical reduction in accident-related deaths with a corresponding increase in personal injury compensation claims, although financial remedy varies a great deal amongst different member states, which has led to demands for reform (Vismara, 2014). It is mirrored in the United States where there have been similar demands to address the substantial increase in personal injury cases since the 1950s. This type of legal action has sometimes been described as predatory, and it may have had the indirect effect of stifling innovation amongst manufacturers and entrepreneurs (Graham, Huber and Litan, 1991). If this is the case, we see an example of ideology at work here, where a financially motivated risk aversion process has taken place. To paraphrase Douglas and Wildavsky (1983), as we become richer we can afford to become more cautious.

### Performance

So far in this chapter we have focused on the notion of relatively small-scale risk negotiated by families and their immediate neighbourhoods. However if we move towards the notion of 'disaster', we see that there is potential for global interests both to define and magnify conceptualisations of risk. For example the role of climate change on resilience planning is becoming increasingly significant, and international agreements are likely to rise in frequency and significance. This may result in international policies coming into conflict with local, more parochial concerns. For example, we have already stated in this chapter that it is



likely to be more risky to walk or cycle to school than to be driven, if the majority of children are being driven as well. The carbon footprint of such risk-related behaviour is such that it may contribute to even higher, more serious risks for children in the medium to long term, including changes to weather systems. In another sense, however, it is important for the disaster rhetoric of climate change to grow, as invoking a global problem is likely to have the effect of unlocking resources for change. The same can be said to apply to issues such as child molestation, terrorism and border control problems. The counterpoint to this is that, in each case, global communication systems are amplifying the effect of incidents. This means something that might previously have been regarded as regional in nature is conflated with larger international issues, giving the impression of a crisis of some kind, when this might in fact represent relatively isolated incidents that were always evident throughout society, only now they have become defined as issues. This leads to what Beck terms the 'staged anticipation of disasters and catastrophes' (Beck, 2007: 11) in which governments and individuals are obliged to take preventative action, whether or not the risk has grown in any quantifiable sense (child molestation perhaps representing the best example of this). In this way we see risk as a form of policy performance.

### Complexity

Giddens describes the ideal state of being sought by citizens as a 'state of bodily and psychic ease' (Giddens, 1991) which is located in a relatively secure and predictable *Umwelt*, or in other words, the familiar physical and social environment of an individual. However disruption to the *Umwelt*, perhaps on account of the performance or staging of risk described in the previous section, can lead to shifts in the power balance between citizen and the authorities as citizens are rendered governable in the context of any changes.

We have already discussed the example of UK authorities imposing parent:child swimming ratios with little supporting empirical evidence, but a better example here is the struggle in the UK surrounding the introduction of Criminal Records Bureau (CRB) checks (2003 – date) and later the Vetting and Barring Scheme (2009-2010) which had an even wider reach, the ContactPoint database (2007-2010), criticised widely as being overly intrusive, and the current Disclosure and Barring Scheme (2012 – date). In this case, the original CRB scheme came in during 2003 in the aftermath of a double child murder. It then escalated in scale and reach over subsequent years, resulted in tens of millions of not just teachers and health workers, but also ancillary workers, volunteers, charity workers and parents being screened for routine contact with children, even if this was to be in the presence of other adults.

All this came about from a desire to reframe the staging of risk in relation to children, with a view to preventing future crimes of child abuse and murder. In doing so, it appeared to promote a view that there was such a thing as an *ideal type* of vetted citizen, who was assumed to represent reduced risk in relation to contact with children. Clearly it could never offer any such assurance, involving only a retrospective view of the behaviour of any individual in relation to one aspect of their conduct within society (i.e. recorded criminal convictions from England). Yet there were a number of unintended consequences as a result of this policy, of which the most significant was the attitude of mistrust that it engendered throughout society. Amongst other things, adult men became increasingly reluctant to come forward to assist children, with this being seen as a 'state-sponsored activity' requiring official approval (Beckford, 2012). Obviously the complexity of rendering adults governable

in this regard, and indeed to some extent alienated, had not been fully appreciated by the Government, in its desire to be seen to be responsive and proactive. In failing to understand such complexity, the policy is likely to have had the effect of reducing the number of non-family members able and willing to support children in everyday life, paradoxically presumably increasing various risks to children's wellbeing.

### Towards a sociology of uncertainty

As discussed at the beginning of this article, the situation of children in relation to risk is particularly emotive, and this leads to people trying to make sense of things based on media reports and Government guidance, whether or not either of these things has any statistical basis in fact. As we have seen, in the confusion there is significant scope for a particular *Weltanschauung* or worldview based on a set of assumptions that are not always relevant. While we have been comparatively critical of a number of organisations in this regard, the real life context of their policies needs to be taken into account before judging them too harshly. Policymaking takes place within a society that has become increasingly disorientated with regard to its conceptualisation of the role, function and identity of children within society. Throughout each of the Five Elements we have worked through here, we see a particular reaction to perceived change in type and scale of risk for children which can frequently be termed a *moral panic*, because it does not necessarily correspond to any obvious increase in risk, only to an increased awareness of the occurrence of crime (for example as a consequence of extensive reporting in the media).

The phrase *moral panic* was coined in Stanley Cohen's 1972 book, and refers to a situation in which certain conditions or groups become defined as a threat to societal values and interests. In the introduction to the third edition (2002) Cohen presciently extends his definition to include child abuse, Satanic rituals and paedophile registers as new forms of moral panic. Cohen emphasises the role of the media in publicizing certain kinds of adverse events, ranging from accusations of Satanic abuse in the 1980s in Cleveland (page xv), to mobs marching on the houses of alleged paedophiles (page xvi), leading to serious consequences for public order. It appears that the apparent loss of the ability to define a risk-related situation amongst many individuals becomes acute when it is distilled into a collective response, leaving the Government to achieve a difficult balancing act between reaction and guidance.

As Cohen writes:

*Public figures had to express sympathy with the parents and share the moral revulsion but also distance themselves from the mob. This was easily done by repeating the inherently negative connotations of lynch mob and mob rule, the primitive atavistic forces whipped up by the News of the World. The rational polity is contrasted to the crowd: volative, uncontrollable and ready to explode.*

(Cohen, 2002: xvi)

Any difficulties in appraising risk for children are therefore rooted in the fact that risk has to be regarded as a social construct. Within this, the role of power is significant and there are notable vested interests in maintaining a rhetoric of risk/crisis. These vested interests

include that of the tabloid newspaper that appropriates such a risk narrative in order to sell newspapers, the large IT company that tenders to develop and run a large-scale database to monitor individuals, and perhaps the charity executive looking to build a career through enhancing the relative status of a charity within society. All these stakeholders seek a tactical advantage in terms of commanding resources or attention. It is here where the term 'risk' is most widely deployed and even abused.

A key factor in this contemporary escalation of the children's risk narrative is likely to be the breakdown of trust in modern society. We live in a comparatively fragmented modern society, in the throes of a technological age. This has led to a desire for individual agency which is in conflict with a sense of loss of control. This makes us uncertain where to invest our trust, and particularly receptive to risk-related statements. Within this context we see safety compliance grow as a means of professional currency, as we saw in relation to swimming pools. We see a desire to rely on expert knowledge in conflict with desire for the democratisation of knowledge, leading to mistrust of various forms of expertise, as we saw in relation to road traffic accident data and the risks of increased car journeys for children. These aspects of the modern risk narrative represent just two examples of conceptual shifting sands as society regroups, and risk moves from an objective to a subjective conceptualisation.

Therefore in seeking to understand how risky it is to be a child, we need to be aware that the late 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> centuries have brought with them a very particular view of risk. This may well be out of step with actual statistical risk, so part of the role of the modern Government, academics and risk professionals should be to challenge this, in order to reassure individuals whilst promoting individual freedoms. Equally, those in positions of authority need to take responsibility for not over-stating risk in order to gain a tactical advantage in going about their business. Only then can we ensure our children are truly cared for in an appropriate and effective way.

#### A postscript

During the preparation of this chapter we came across an interesting example of conflicting risk assessment imperatives in practice. In preparation for an Office for Standards in Education (OFSTED) visit in 2015, a local primary school asked their children what is a fairly routine safeguarding question as part of a school attitudes survey. The question was 'Do you feel safe at this school?' The response was mixed but overall it seemed that to many children the answer was 'No!' The children reported that there were two main problems with the school. The first was that there were many spiders and this was scary. The second was that they were convinced the building was haunted, and this felt even more scary. The moral of this tale is that we need to be very careful when imposing a 21<sup>st</sup> century view of safeguarding on our children, who have legitimate concerns of their own that require attention.

## References

- Association of British Insurers (2012) *Time to put the brake on the UK's exorbitant legal bill says the ABI* (Press Release, 23<sup>rd</sup> February 2012)  
Accessed at  
<https://www.abi.org.uk/News/News-releases/2012/02/Time-to-put-the-brake-on-the-UKs-exorbitant-legal-bill-says-the-ABI>  
[21 January 2016]
- Backett-Milburn, K and Harden, J (2004) 'How children and their families construct and negotiate risk, safety and danger' *Childhood* 11 (4) 429-447
- Barton, A H (1969) *Communities in Disaster: A Sociological Analysis of Collective Stress Situations* (New York, Doubleday)
- Beck, U (1992) *Risk Society: Towards a New Modernity* (London, Sage)
- Beck, U (2007) *World at Risk* (Cambridge, Polity)
- Beckford, M (2012) "CRB checks top 30million but create 'atmosphere of mistrust'" *Daily Telegraph* 23 April 2012
- Brenner RA, Trumble AC, Smith GS, Kessler EP, Overpeck MD. *Pediatrics* 2001 Jul; 108(1):85-9.
- Cohen, S (2002) *Folk Devils and Moral Panic* (Oxford, Routledge)
- Daily Telegraph (2003) 'NSPCC's Wrong Priorities' 25 February 2003
- Dombrowsky, W R (1989) *Katastrophen und Katastrophenschutz. Eine soziologische Analyse* (Wiesbaden, Deutscher Universitätsverlag)
- Dombrowsky, W R (1998) 'Again and again: Is a disaster what we call a disaster?' *International Journal of Mass Emergencies and Disasters* 13: 241-254
- Douglas, M and Wildavsky (1983) *Risk and Culture: An Essay on the Selection of Technological and Environmental Dangers* Berkeley, University of California Press)
- Furedi, F (2014) 'NSPCC – Not in the best interests of the child' (9 July 2014)  
Accessed at:  
[http://www.frankfuredi.com/article/nspcc\\_not\\_in\\_the\\_best\\_interests\\_of\\_the\\_child](http://www.frankfuredi.com/article/nspcc_not_in_the_best_interests_of_the_child)  
[11 December 2016]
- Giddens, A (1991) *Modernity and Self-Identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age* (Cambridge, Polity)
- Graham, J D Huber, P and Litan, P (1991) *The Liability Maze* (Washington, Brookings Institute Press)
- Horton, R (2004) "UNICEF Leadership 2005-2015: A call for strategic change" *Lancet* Vol 364, Issue 9451, 11–17 December 2004, pp 2071–2074
- Information Commissioner's Office (2015) Taking Photographs in Schools  
Accessed at:  
[https://ico.org.uk/media/for-organisations/documents/1136/taking\\_photos.pdf](https://ico.org.uk/media/for-organisations/documents/1136/taking_photos.pdf)  
(12 December 2015)
- Mey, G and Gunther, H (2014) *The Life Space of the Urban Child: Perspectives on Martha Muchow's Classic Study* (London, Transaction Publishers)
- Hillman, M Adams, J and Whitelegg, J (1988) *One False Move ... A Study of Children's Independent Mobility* (London, Policy Studies Institute)
- Levi-Strauss, C (1994) *The Savage Mind* (Oxford, Oxford University Press)
- Perry, R W and Quarantelli, E L (2005) *What is a Disaster? New Answers to Old Questions* (New York, International Research Committee on Disasters)

Pritchard, C., Davey, J. and Williams, R. (2013) 'Who kills children? Re-examining the evidence' *The British Journal of Social Work*, 43: 1403-1438.

Quarantelli, E L (1998) *What is a Disaster? Perspectives on the Question* (London, Routledge)

Royal Society for the Prevention of Accidents (2014) *New UK figures reveal 381 drowning and other water-related deaths in 2013*

Accessed at:  
<http://www.rosipa.com/media-centre/press-office/press-releases/detail/?id=1276>  
 (13 December 2015)

Royal Society for the Prevention of Accidents (2015) *Taking Children Swimming*

Accessed at:  
<http://www.rosipa.com/leisure-safety/water/advice/taking-children-swimming/>  
 (12 December 2015)

Saluja, Gitanjali et al. "Swimming Pool Drownings Among US Residents Aged 5–24 Years: Understanding Racial/Ethnic Disparities." *American Journal of Public Health* 96.4 (2006): 728–733. PMC. Web. 21 Jan. 2016.

Saracho, O and Spodek, B (1998) *Multiple Perspectives on Play in Early Childhood* (New York, State University of New York Press)

Schofield R and Midi Berry, B (1971) 'Age at Baptism in Pre-Industrial England' *Population Studies* 33: 49-63

Scott, S Jackson, S and Backett-Milburn, K (1998) "Swings and roundabouts: risk anxiety and the everyday worlds of children" *Sociology* 32 (4) 689-705

Sorokin P and Merton R (1937) Social Time, A Methodological and Functional Analysis *American Journal of Sociology* 42 (5) 615-629

Souter-Brown, G (2015) *Landscape and Urban design for Health and Wellbeing* (London, Routledge)

Tandridge Trust (2015) *Adult and Child Ratios*

Accessed at:  
<http://www.tandridgetrust.co.uk/index.php/swimming.html>  
 (12 December 2015)

United Nations Children's Fund (2005) *Childhood under threat: the state of the world's children 2005* (UNICEF, New York)

Urry, J (2003) *Global Complexity* (Cambridge, Polity)

Vismara, L (2014) *A Comparison of Compensation for Personal Injury Claims in Europe* (Cologne, General Reinsurance)